



## Exploring parental understanding of gender diversity in high schools: Literature-based study

<sup>1</sup>John Chaka 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education Foundations, Faculty of Education

University of the Free State, South Africa

<sup>1</sup>Primary author: [Chaka1@ufs.ac.za](mailto:Chaka1@ufs.ac.za)

**Abstract**—For a long time now, high school trans learners have been subject to discrimination because their gender identity does not align with the gender assigned to them at birth. This study explored how parents' understanding of gender can promote gender diversity in high schools. Parents' reactions to their children 'coming out' as transgender were used as a proxy to determine what parents' understanding of gender is and whether they can promote gender diversity in high schools. This literature-based study draws from the literature review chapter of a doctoral thesis. The literature search for this study was carried out using various databases, such as EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and SABINET. Additional literature searches were completed using the University of the Free State's online and physical libraries. The findings of this study show a trend of parents taking an affirming stance towards transgenderism and inclining to challenge the established binary systems of gender. However, more studies are needed in the South African school context to explore parents' understanding of gender more deeply.

**Keywords:** Cisnormativity, Gender diversity, Binary, Cisgender, Non-conforming, Parents, Queer

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### I. INTRODUCTION

THE South African constitution protects the rights of trans learners against gender discrimination. Despite this constitutional right, however, the dominance of genderism in many South African schools is prevalent (Bottoman, 2021; Mugerwa-Sekawabe, 2023; Richardson, 2021; Ubisi, 2021). Global literature suggests that parents affirming gender diversity can help trans learners withstand gender discrimination (Hodax et al., 2020; Lelutiu-Weinberger, English & Sandanapitchai, 2020; Pollitt et al., 2021). Gender affirmation is when a person's gender identity, which is not necessarily the same as that assigned at birth, is socially and/or medically affirmed. Yet, cisnormative school culture can amplify the ease with which cis learners gender discriminate against trans learners. Cisnormativity is the idea that every person identifies with the gender assigned at birth (Boe et al., 2020; Köllen & Rumens, 2022; McBride & Neary, 2021). This study explores how parents' understanding of gender can promote gender diversity at South African high schools. All learners who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth will be referred to as 'cis learners.'

### II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper explored an understanding of parents regarding gender and whether they can play a role in promoting gender diversity in High Schools. A review of various search engines was undertaken. The reaction of parents towards gender diversity during the time their trans learners reveal that they are trans was used as a measure of their understanding. Furthermore, inferring from psychological reactions can provide information about a particular individual that could indicate their unique perspective on one or more situations (Gnepp & Gould, 1985; Smith, Parr & Friston, 2019). Therefore, reviewing literature about how parents react to transgenderism and trans learners is a way to

understand better how parents view gender and whether they can promote gender diversity in South African high schools. Important to note, however, is that most published studies about parents, transgender children, and gender diversity in schools have been conducted in developed countries. Due to the limited number of publications from Southern Africa focusing on parents' understanding of gender diversity at the school level, this study relies more on international literature.

#### Parents' understanding of gender

There is an increasing concern that transgender learners are disadvantaged when they express their identity (Campuzano, 2008; Lo, Liu & Yu, 2022). Indeed, in a quantitative study completed by Bastian and Haslam (2006), it was suggested that many parents may believe that gender is binary. This is exciting data when read considering the study by Grossman et al. (2005), who indicated that parents verbally and physically abuse their children after their children have revealed their transgender identities. Research also shows that several trans learners have recently faced trauma and adversity due to their gender identity (Kelley et al., 2022; Price et al., 2023; Taube & Mussap, 2022). The following section addresses how parents understand gender. The measure of this understanding is based on their reactions to their child/children 'coming out' as transgender. We argue that a cisnormative parental understanding of gender contributes to gender dysphoria. In contrast, an affirming parental understanding can help trans learners confront the cisnormative schooling culture still present at many schools.

#### Coming out as a measure of parental understanding of gender

Parents' understanding of gender is mainly measured by their reaction to their transgender children 'coming out'. The term 'coming out' generally refers to a process during which trans children engage with their parents, intending to reveal that they are non-binary. The 'coming out' process involves negotiation and reconciliation (Chan & Huang, 2022; Kennedy, 2022; Tyler & Abetz, 2022). Coming out is not a once-off event, and the way a parent reacts to a child's initial admission

reveals much about their understanding of gender; this initial reaction occurs before they can reconceptualise their understanding of what gender is. A trans learner's coming out process was used as an opportunity to explore how parents understand gender whether they affirmed the gender identity of trans learners or whether they rejected it. Canitz and Haberstroh (2022), for example, found that many parents experience multifaceted grief because of their children coming out. Complex grief reactions are indicative of their understanding of what gender is (e.g., Abreu et al., 2022; Coolhart et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2016; Testoni & Pinducciu, 2020; Wahlig, 2015). Parents' multiple reactions during their child's coming out are rooted in the knowledge they have about what gender is.

Parents' understanding of gender seems to be based on the information they receive from society about what gender and sex mean. Abreu et al. (2022) suggested that a lack of informational support about gender and transgenderism has affected how parents react when their child comes out to them. Similarly, Kidd et al. (2023) found that parents could not differentiate between gender and sex. Some parents who participated in the Kidd et al. (2023) study commented that when their children came out, it revealed how little they knew about sex and gender. Commonly, many parents consider gender to be synonymous with sex since they expect their children to identify with the gender assigned to them at birth (Beckett, Bode & Crewe, 1995; Bölte et al., 2023; Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999). Parents who do not observe the early signs of a child's non-binary gender identity may believe that being transgender is just a phase (Canitz & Haberstroh, 2022). However, many trans learners take their time before deciding to come out, which suggests that an accumulation of confidence is needed before a child is comfortable enough to come out to their parents.

In some cases, despite this accumulated confidence, many parents still mostly react with disbelief to their child's coming out. This disbelief often signals most parents' understanding of gender as cisnormative in nature. Some trans learners delay coming out because they anticipate the lack of support they will receive from their parents (Clark, Marshall & Saewyc, 2020). This anticipation of a lack of support makes some trans learners opt for different ways to communicate their coming out (other than face-to-face) (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017; De La Cruz, 2023; Manning, 2015). Some trans children use writing as a form of communication to come out and avoid face-to-face conversations. Written communication can encourage trans learners to consolidate their understanding of gender by expressing it more fully in writing (Jones, 1997; Ortiz-Myers & Costello, 2021). Opting to write instead of verbally communicating in a face-to-face situation implies that there are trans learners who predict their parents have a cisnormative understanding of gender. Thus, efforts by trans learners to use different channels of communication may be indicative of the internal struggle they have gone through in deciding how best to come out to their parents.

#### **Cisnormative understanding of parents as contributors to gender dysphoria**

The disclosure of gender orientation can be a stressful and complicated time in a transgender person's life (Koch et al., 2023). Frigerio et al. (2021), for example, explored the experiences and representations of parents of non-binary adolescents diagnosed with gender dysphoria. The study reported that trans children often experienced stress before coming out to their parents. For some trans learners under the age of 13, this stress can be experienced as a sense of incongruity between their birth sex and gender identity (Grossman et al., 2006). This sense of incongruity is like gender dysphoria, which refers to the 'discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth' (Coleman et al., 2012, p. 5). In a study by Esposito et al. (2022), which focused on the qualities of mentalisation and the perception of parental mirroring in a group of Italian transgender people, it was found that most transgender learners suppress their gender identity, which can lead to isolation and gender dysphoria. Romito et al. (2021)

completed a similar study, which explored the intersection of transgender identity, body image, and disordered eating through semi-structured interviews. They found that trans learners who were between the ages of 14 and 20 years can develop a variety of disorders, such as eating disorders, due to their body dissatisfaction, which results in the dissonance between their physical bodies and sense of gender identity. Campbell et al. (2023) make a similar observation, suggesting that a lack of parental support for non-binary learners can contribute to gender dysphoria, which can further result in the development of a variety of disorders and cause trans learners to neglect themselves. Parents' non-affirming stance on gender identity can also lead to trans learners attempting suicide since their experience of their bodies does not match their identity.

The non-acceptance of transgender children can thus result in mental disorders, a sense of isolation, and loss of relationships (Matsumunyane & Hlalele, 2020). Indeed, in a U.S.-based study that examined the chronic stressors that are triggered because of the relationships trans children have with their parents, it was reported that negative parental responses lead to minority stressors and the increased risk of mental health issues associated with expecting rejection (Grossman et al., 2021). Therefore, it seems clear that if parents who have a cisnormative understanding of gender can reconceptualise gender as a social construct, then they are better equipped to provide trans learners with the necessary support to battle their conflicting emotions.

#### **An affirming stance on gender as a sign of a reconceptualised understanding**

Recently, some parents of trans learners have taken an affirming stance on gender diversity as a form of support for trans children. For example, a review of 64 publications by de Bres (2022) examined the literature on parents' experiences of gender-diverse children and reported a trend across the publications reviewed. The findings attest to a robust pathologising approach to gender diversity in the 1990s and 2000s, in which parents viewed gender diversity negatively. This was validated by the reactions of parents reported in that era. However, in the 2010s, research shows that parents began moving towards a more gender-affirming approach to gender diversity. This recent, more positive approach taken by parents has been called a parental transition process. This more positive and affirmative parental approach to gender diversity, as highlighted by Frigerio et al. (2021), seems to be motivated by the desire to promote the well-being of trans children. Parents who took an affirmative approach to gender diversity began criticising other parents for not taking a similar approach.

Some parents who later affirmed the gender identities of their trans children acknowledged their limited knowledge of transgender issues, which further suggests their acknowledgment that gender is not restricted to binary boundaries. To elaborate on this point, we draw on a literature-based study by Kidd et al. (2023), who aimed at enabling the parents of trans learners to share their stories and explore how they met their trans children's needs, highlighted that parents frequently acknowledged their ignorance of gender diversity issues (Kidd et al., 2023), which acted as a barrier to their ability to reconceptualise what gender is. Abreu et al. (2022) also indicated that parents who came to acknowledge gender diversity did so because of their own experiences with their trans children. Parents who affirm the gender identity of their children do so for the sake of their child's well-being.

Being exposed to trans people or having knowledge of transgender matters helps parents to support trans children. This exposure to the transgender community and transgender individuals is a key factor in helping parents take a more affirmative stance toward transgender children, as evidenced in a literature-based study by Tyler et al. (2020). The argument made in this paper, thus, is that parental support is essential for trans learners. When parents reconceptualise their understanding of gender, they are better enabled to support transgender children. To add to this point, we draw on Weiselberg, Shadianloo, and Fisher (2019), who found that supporting gender-diverse learners is essential as it helps them avoid depression and

suicide attempts. As discussed earlier, parents' non-affirmation of trans children can lead to stress and possible incidences of self-inflicted harm.

Parents also go through a social transition when reconceptualising their understanding of gender. Indeed, a qualitative study by Horton (2023b), which investigated parents' reflections on how they supported their trans children, found that the happiness of trans children is linked to parental support and their affirmation of gender diversity. In their study of transgender children, Canitz and Haberstroh (2022) found that parents of trans learners also go through a social transition while trying to adjust to their child's coming out. Going through this social transition ultimately assisted them to affirm and support the gender identity of their children, which, in turn, led to their experiencing a sense of euphoria. This suggests that trans children with parents who affirm their gender identity can better recover from the brutal expectations of a cisnormative society and the insults that inevitably come from not following these societal expectations. Several trans learners consider their parents' opinions on their gender identity as the most important, as evidenced by Johnson et al. (2020). Ultimately, parental support is a contributor to the mental strength of trans learners. In sum, parental understanding and affirmation of gender diversity are key to the support needed by transgender learners.

#### **Parents on whether they can promote gender diversity**

Parental support is a critical factor in protecting trans learners from mental health risks such as depression and suicide (Belmont, Cronin & Pepping, 2024; Martino, Kassen & Omercajic, 2022; Matsuno et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2024). This conclusion suggests that trans learners become vulnerable to gender dysphoria when they lack parental support. One trans learner from a study by Johnson et al. (2020), for example, said that the non-affirming behaviours of their parent contributed to their internalising negative feelings about themselves (Johnson et al., 2020). However, when parents are supportive of trans children and affirm their identities, transgender children are more likely to internalise positive self-esteem. Parents in the study of Horton (2023b), for example, advised all families to support and affirm the identities of trans children to prioritise their happiness. The views of some parents suggest a willingness to promote gender diversity at the school level.

In terms of whether the school curriculum should teach children about transgenderism, some parents who only recently took a more affirming stance towards their transgender children felt that gender-diverse issues should not be taught at school. For example, in 2093, parents in a study by Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby (2022) were asked whether they wanted to be involved with the curriculum of school-based relationships and sexuality education. Of these 2093 participants, 68% responded in the affirmative. Despite most parents showing interest in allowing their children to learn about relationships and sexuality, 168 parents indicated that they would withdraw their children from the class if topics such as gender diversity were taught. The percentage of parents who do not want gender diversity taught in schools, however, is in the minority in some studies, with over 80% of parents wanting to see gender diversity included in the government school curriculum.

Although some parents in the study by Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby (2022) took an affirming stance towards gender diversity, most trans learners still experience challenges at school since gender diversity is not affirmed in many schools. The challenges encountered by trans learners suggest a lack of parental support to schools. Findings from a study that examined the mental health of transgender youth between the ages of 13 and 24 in the U.S. reported that 71% experienced depressive moods, 39% considered suicide, and 18% attempted suicide (Price-Feeney, Green & Dorison, 2020). Despite the challenges that some trans learners experience at school, however, the affirmative stance taken by some parents globally is still a hopeful sign in terms of ensuring that trans learners are protected at schools. In short, schools' resistant attitudes towards trans learners can aggravate transgender learners' 'mental health problems and lead to adverse psychosocial consequences, while supportive behaviours [are] related to perceived

positive psychosocial consequences' (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 167). This reflection by Johnson et al. (2020) proposes that parents who display supportive behaviours can play a part in promoting gender diversity in high schools.

In contrast, unsupportive parents may find it challenging to promote gender diversity. Much of the current research does show that some parents are starting to reconceptualise their understanding of gender and beginning to promote gender diversity at schools. Yet, most parents still seem to reject transgenderism. The largely cis norms set by society of how gender should be performed (as a binary construct) influence most parents regarding how they anticipate negative experiences in their children's futures as the result of their diverse gender expression (Clark et al., 2024; Hidalgo & Chen, 2019; Moss-Racusin et al., 2024; Simon, Wang & Farr, 2024). Contrary to standards set by society, however, the internalised trans prejudice by trans learners contributes to gender minority stress. Parents in the study by Horton (2023a) revealed that some trans learners dislike their gender identity and wish they were cisgender. This research seems to confirm the influence of a cisnormative society on parents' attitudes towards transgenderism, and the commonly held assumption that everyone identifies with the gender assigned to them at birth.

#### **Parents' understanding of a cisnormative school culture**

The fact that most parents understand gender as being a binary construct, as shown above, implies that most schools likely promote a cisnormative school culture. 'Cisnormative' is the idea that every person identifies with the gender assigned to them at birth. For this paper, cisnormative school culture refers to binary views of gender, which most schools commonly hold. These schools, silently or openly, promote the expression of gender as male or female only. This section analyses the cisnormative school culture by showing the influence of parents in maintaining or queering it. This paper uses 'queering' as a verb that is meant to deconstruct the binary view of gender; the deconstruction will be used to interrogate society's views of gender and move toward understanding gender as a social construct (Lesutis, 2023; Lewin, 2024; Tarrayo & Salonga, 2023). Developing an understanding of how parents think about gender is therefore used to explore how cisnormative school culture is maintained or queered.

#### **Queering cisnormative school culture over maintaining it**

Parents play a significant role in the maintenance of cisnormative culture. A two-decade-old cross-sectional study by Hill and Craft (2003) supports this. The study examined how parental involvement in school can positively or negatively influence a child's achievements. The researchers reported that teachers' perceptions of parental involvement did seem to impact children's performance. Some teachers perceive parents as being the custodians of a particular school culture. In yet another decade-and-a-half-old Canadian study by Schneider and Dimito (2008), which focused on educators' beliefs about raising transgender issues in schools, it was found that 56% of teachers felt concerned about the possibility of parent protests if schools decided to respond to transgenderism and non-binary identity issues. These responses present parents as barriers to including gender diversity in school curricula. The responses also point to the influential status of parents in schools and allude to the power parents may have about queering cisnormative school culture, should they be able and willing to reconceptualise their understanding of gender.

As already argued in this paper, some parents have recently taken an affirmative stance toward gender diversity. Further evidence comes from a recent study investigating parents' feelings about including gender diversity material in the curriculum. The study found that most parents who participated supported the idea of gender diversity content in secondary school curricula (Ullman, Ferfolja & Hobby, 2022). Thus, the overarching argument of much of the literature is that if parents reconceptualise their understanding of gender, gender diversity can be better promoted in schools. As a result, trans learners will feel more at ease. Even though most parents are perceived as being enhancers of a cisnormative school culture, the fact that some parents who have started

taking an affirmative stance on gender diversity have suggested that amendments be made to school documents (in sections that ask students whether they are male or female) is a positive sign of the beginnings of queering cisnormative school culture.

#### **Improve school forms to avoid misgendering of trans learners**

Parents who queer cisnormativity in schools consider amending application forms to include non-binary or transgender as gender options as another way of supporting gender diversity at schools. A study comprising 215 cis women and 35 transgender participants in the United States by Goldberg and Allen (2022) suggests that cisnormative assumptions play a part in marginalising transgender individuals. Furthermore, Goldberg and Allen (2022) claim that school and health forms suggest that everyone is cisgender (that is, only male or female). Accordingly, parents who are queering cisnormativity have proposed amendments to such forms to include gender diversity as a way of supporting trans learners. Parents in an American study that explored bias and discrimination against trans parents and their children recommended that application/health forms should be improved by including gender variance to avoid misgendering (Coulter-Thompson et al., 2023). Misgendering is when someone uses incorrect pronouns to refer to another person intentionally or inadvertently (Abreu et al., 2022; McCarty & Burt, 2024; Morgenroth et al., 2024). In other words, misgendering is another obstacle parents and schools face during a child's transition.

A study by Marx et al. (2023), which asked transgender learners to identify what forms of parental support they feel are the most helpful, found that transgender learners recommended using names and pronouns that affirm their gender. Mann et al. (2023) also found that trans learners feel super supported when people use their correct gender pronouns as well as the name that aligns with their gender identity. In contrast to most parents who seem to believe that a person's name should align with the gender assigned to them at birth, a mixed method study, which explored parental support and adjustment during a child's gender transformation, found that parents who have recently begun to show support for their transgender child do so by using their affirmed names and pronouns (Hale et al., 2021). This again implies that some parents' recent reconceptualised understanding of gender has led to trans learners' increased sense of well-being and ease at high school. Globally, adjusted parental views of gender are no longer threatening trans learners' identities. Recently, some parents have demonstrated a positive approach to gender diversity despite feeling challenged by their children's queering of cisnormativity. Although the literature reviewed suggests that some parents feel that cisnormative school culture should be queered, most schools remain cisnormative since the majority still consider gender to be binary. However, the successful promotion of gender diversity at schools relies on the participation of parents.

#### **Parental participation in queering cisnormative school culture**

Yet another way parents can more effectively support teachers and schools in promoting gender diversity is by sharing their knowledge of trans issues. Due to the dominant cisnormative culture in society, some parents who take an affirmative stance on gender diversity have gone further in trying to support their transgender children by increasing their knowledge of transgender issues. An example of this comes from a decade-long study by Johnson et al. (2014), who aimed to discover what parents' challenges and concerns were regarding their transgender children. The schools in the study stated that parents decided to educate themselves about the gender identity and the needs of their children. These parents went as far as buying books for guidance counsellors at schools to learn about gender diversity as a form of queering the cisnormative school culture.

However, contrary to the value of parental support in ensuring that trans learners are healthy, most parents are still not effectively helping schools promote gender diversity. As a result, schools also still struggle to encourage gender diversity. Findings from a study that narrated visions of what better schooling contexts look like for trans learners

illustrated that most schools are cisnormative and expect children to identify with one of two binary gender identities (Skelton, 2022). Ineffective parental participation in queering cisnormativity acts to maintain a cisnormative school culture, which plays a role in causing stress for trans learners when they are at school. A study by Horton (2023a), which examined how the stress of gender minorities manifests in schools, found that non-affirmation is a component of gender minority stress. This indicates that trans learners become stressed when their gender identity is not affirmed. Conversely, a cross-sectional examination by Marx et al. (2021) of correlates between sexual violence and suicidal ideation among trans learners found that gender transphobia manifests through policies that dictate binary gender expression and restrict how males and females should behave and dress.

Usually, the inability of most parents to queer cisnormativity contributes to the enhancement of a cisnormative school environment, which, in turn, feeds the difficulty that parents have in queering cisnormativity. Studies from almost a decade ago already found that a cisnormative culture in schools can have an upsetting impact on the motivation, health, and learning of trans learners (Blosnich et al., 2016; Huebner, Thoma & Neilands, 2015; Mustanski, Andrews & Puckett, 2016; Tsypes et al., 2016). Thus, part of our overarching argument in this paper is that a cisnormative school culture can negatively impact the decisions that trans learners make in their lives. One parent in the study of Johnson et al. (2014), for example, told the researchers that her trans daughter had once attempted to use scissors to cut her genitals because she was not allowed to attend school if she continued to identify with her preferred gender identity (that is, female). The child was assigned male at birth.

Often, trans learners are treated differently from cis learners because of the existing cisnormative school culture, which equates gender with sex. This difference in treatment is reflected in the study by De Pedro, Shim-Pelayo, and Bishop (2019), who found that a cisnormative school culture makes it easy for cis learners to victimise and discriminate against trans learners. Similarly, Dangaltcheva (2018) found that the bullying and victimisation of transgender learners led to mental health problems. In such cases, parental support can be of great help to trans learners in coping with genderism. If parents can queer cisnormativity in schools, then gender diversity can be better promoted, and schools can become more enjoyable and safer spaces for trans learners. Indeed, Mann et al. (2023) explored how and why non-binary learners experience euphoria at school and found that school practices can play a determining role in whether a transgender learner has a positive learning experience. Cisnormative school practices affect how trans learners experience school; parental support in queering cisnormativity can also be of great help to the happiness and well-being of trans learners.

#### **Parental understanding in Southern Africa regarding gender**

Due to the limited number of publications about Southern African parents' understanding of gender diversity at the school level, this section uses the study of Francis et al. (2019) as a base since it focuses on gender diversity in schools in five Southern African countries. In completing the study, Francis et al. (2019) aimed to explore how gender diversity is understood in schools in Southern Africa. The researchers reported that almost all Southern African countries resist gender diversity.

In Botswana, there is a culture of silence around gender issues, and a cisnormative culture dominates. Combined, these two cultures, one of silence and one of cisnormativity, impede the government from addressing and acknowledging gender diversity. Most parents in Botswana consider gender binary, so parents hardly promote gender diversity in schools (Mangwegape, Manyedi & Molato, 2023; Mangwegape, 2022). In Lesotho, traditional and cultural practices reinforce the patriarchy. At schools, boys are expected to display masculinity or be humiliated for not upholding societal expectations. Most schools in Lesotho are run by churches (Khanyetsi, 2023; Mokots, 2022; Morenammele & Schoeman, 2020; Sahara-Ghana et al., 2023),

making the promotion of gender diversity challenging. Information from the available studies seems to show that the understanding of gender among parents in Lesotho is like that of Botswana in that most parents consider gender to be binary. A study by Matsumunyane and Hlalele (2020), which explored the social vulnerability of trans learners in Lesotho, reported that most of the Basotho communities claim that gender diversity does not exist among their people.

According to Francis et al. (2019), at the time of the publication, there was a complete absence of school-based research on gender diversity in Eswatini. This was attributed to the government's denial that gender diversity exists in Eswatini. Motsa (2018) explored gender diversity in Eswatini schools, for example, exploring the equality balance between male and female, not gender, beyond the binary gender system. Despite the limited availability of school-based studies on gender diversity in Eswatini, some literature that reports on trans individuals mainly focuses on the stigmas surrounding trans individuals due to their identity (Lacombe-Duncan & Logie, 2021; Logie, 2021). These studies suggest that most parents' understanding of gender is cisnormative in nature and, therefore, most parents will not promote gender diversity in schools.

In Namibia, according to Francis et al. (2019), gender diversity is regarded as an equality issue that involves protecting girls and children. Gender diversity is viewed as a Western notion, un-African, and a threat to Namibian national identity. Haitembu (2023), for example, reported that recently, in Namibia, there has been minimal inclusion of gender-diverse learners at schools, suggesting that most parents and teachers still have a cisnormative understanding of gender. Even though recent international literature shows that more parents are reconceptualising their knowledge of gender, there seems to be much less of this reconceptualisation in Southern Africa and fewer parents who are willing to promote gender diversity; they are silent to avoid stigmatisation.

In contrast to other Southern African countries, Francis et al. (2019) found that the South African constitution protects and promotes the non-discrimination of gender-diverse people. However, despite the protective constitution, Siwela, Sikhwari, and Mutshaeni (2018) explored the challenges faced by non-binary learners and their parents in Driekoppies village, Mpumalanga, one of South Africa's provinces. They found that most of the challenges that trans learners encounter at school are commonly found in the community. More recently, Francis (2023) reported that transgender learners recognise cisnormative assumptions as a performance, and the scripts of performance are by the society and, at the same time, assert knowing script of who they are. Non-binary learners in South Africa seem to be taking steps towards queering cisnormative school culture. This student stance seems to be irrespective of whether parents also queer the cisnormative culture or choose to maintain it.

### III. CONCLUSION

There seems to be an emerging trend among parents to take an affirmative stance on transgenderism. Despite this emerging trend, however, most trans learners in high schools still face several challenges, including stigmatisation, gender discrimination, and misgendering. Parental support can help trans learners cope with these challenges. Much of the literature reviewed for this research does not directly report on parents' understanding of gender. Instead, it focuses on how parents react to their children coming out as transgender. Additionally, although we argued in this paper that parents can play a role in promoting gender diversity at schools, as evidenced by the affirmation of transgenderism by parents in some of the studies reviewed, it is essential to remember that the parents who were involved in these studies, were either parents of trans learners or trans parents. Parents with school-going age cis children were scarcely involved in the studies reviewed. Therefore, more research studies that involve parents of both trans and cis learners are needed to explore parental understandings of gender fully and whether they can play a role in

promoting gender diversity.

### IV. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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